

“The Hovering, Brooding Holy Spirit of God.”

My first memory of hearing those verses from our reading from Genesis— and some of you may remember this as well— was on Christmas Eve of 1968, when the three astronauts of Apollo 8 took turns reading the first 10 verses of Genesis 1. Hearing those verses gave me chills then, and it still does but I think for very different reasons. I’d like to explain.

Our reading from Genesis 1 begins with this:

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

It’s a fairly straightforward description; it’s almost as if a dispassionate observer was simply recording what he saw. And I think that’s part of the problem. Our translation doesn’t— and perhaps it’s because the English language cannot— do justice to what’s being expressed in the original Hebrew.

I want to give you two examples of what I mean. In the second half of verse 2 we read this:

“a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”

The Hebrew behind “wind from God” is *ruach elohim*. While it might be fair to translate *ruach elohim* as “wind from God” in some settings, to my mind the context argues for a different translation: either as the “breath of God,” or as “the Spirit of God.” And if I’m right— and I think I am— then what’s being described is something much more intimate or personal.

I mean, think about it: Say you’re standing in a field, and the wind starts to blow, and you can feel it on your skin. Maybe it’s a welcome wind, because it’s a hot day and the wind helps you to cool off. But maybe it’s an unwelcome wind, because the day is already cold enough, and the wind is making you feel colder.

Whatever. But we've all had this sort of interaction with the wind, and we don't give it much thought.

Now imagine someone is standing close enough to you that you can feel their breath on your skin. Now regardless of whether it's a good or bad thing, that someone is so close that you can feel their breath, I think we'd all agree that there's a much more intimate dynamic going on than if you're just standing in the field feeling a breeze.

Anyway, I think it's this sort of intimate dynamic, between God and creation, that the author of Genesis is trying to describe; that God is so close to His creation that it can't help but feel God's breath; it can't help but react to it; it can't help but be changed by it.

So, there's the *ruach elohim* language going on in the background, and it's telling us that there's stuff going on just beneath the surface of our text.

And then, there's another Hebrew word in that same verse, which continues to tell us that there's more going on than meets the eye. And that word is *rachaph*. Interestingly, this Hebrew word is being used to describe what this "wind from God"— this *ruach elohim*— is actually doing.

In our translation we read that this "wind from God *swept* over the face of the waters." Again, a fairly straightforward description. But the word *rachaph* really has the meaning of something being moved or affected, and especially with feelings of tender love; really, it means to cherish something; like, for example, in Deuteronomy 32:11, where the eagle broods over and cherishes her young, fluttering over them.

In other words, like a tender mother, God's Spirit hovers, or broods over the watery chaos. That's really what's being described in our first reading; but we don't get that from our translation, because our language is so feeble.

And so, that's what's going on in Genesis. But with that, when we read those passages from the Acts of the Apostles, and from the Gospel of Mark, we are then reminded that the Spirit of God also broods, and blows, and cherishes over our individual lives as well.

At the baptism of Jesus, Mark describes "the Spirit" as "descending [on Jesus] like a dove." And when Paul baptizes those twelve clueless people in

Ephesus, Luke writes that “the Holy Spirit came on them.” So obviously the Spirit of God is the common thread woven through these three readings.

So, what do these three readings tell us of the work or the function of the Holy Spirit? Well, that the Spirit of God forms the formless. That the Spirit takes simple matter and breathes life into it. That the Spirit creates purpose, order, and meaning out of chaos. That the Spirit fills the empty void with beauty and goodness. And that the Spirit turns darkness into light, night into day, the evening into a new morning, and calls into existence those things that didn’t exist.

That’s what the Spirit did in creation, and that’s what the Spirit can do in our lives. The Spirit of God, in other words, is kind of a big deal.

I want to tell you a little about a woman who discovered this about God’s Spirit, and who allowed it to move through her life in significant ways; enabling this woman to do remarkable things.

Her name was Hildegard of Bingen, and she lived from 1098 to 1179. At a time when life expectancy was about forty years, she easily doubled that. But she didn’t just have a long life; she had an incredibly productive life as well.

She was the youngest of ten children born into an aristocratic family. She started having spiritual visions when she was three years old. At age eight her parents decided to dedicate her to the religious life. At the age of fourteen she became a Benedictine nun, and eventually rose to become an abbess.

Over the course of her life, Hildegard established two convents, conducted four preaching tours, penned at least 400 letters, wrote music and a morality play, supervised illuminated manuscripts, cared for her fellow sisters, and wrote three major theological treatises based upon her famous visions.

For several decades she kept her visions to herself. But finally, when she was forty-two years old, Hildegard says that God told her to write down what she had seen and heard. This is her description of what God said to her, in that regard:

“So now you must give others an intelligible account of what you see with your inner eye and what you hear with your inner ear. Your testimony will help them. As a

result, others will learn how to know their Creator.
They'll no longer refuse to adore God.”

And so, Hildegard did just that. And from the library of her writing, I'd like to read to you something that Hildegard wrote, as she reflected upon the brooding Spirit of God.

O comforting fire of Spirit,
Life, within the very Life of all Creation.
Holy you are in giving life to All.

Holy you are in anointing
those who are not whole;
Holy you are in cleansing
a festering wound.

O sacred breath,
O fire of love,
O sweetest taste in my breast
which fills my heart
with a fine aroma of virtues.

O most pure fountain
through whom it is known
that God has united strangers
and inquired after the lost.

O breastplate of life
and hope of uniting
all members as One,
O sword-belt of honor,
enfold those who offer blessing.

Care for those
who are imprisoned by the enemy
and dissolve the bonds of those
whom Divinity wishes to save.

O mightiest path which penetrates All,
from the height to every Earthly abyss,
you compose All, you unite All.

Through you clouds stream, ether flies,
stones gain moisture,
waters become streams,
and the earth exudes Life.

You always draw out knowledge,
bringing joy through Wisdom's inspiration.

Therefore, praise be to you
who are the sound of praise
and the greatest prize of Life,
who are hope and richest honor
bequeathing the reward of Light.

Hildegard was a remarkable woman who felt the *ruach elohim* brooding over her life. But what's really remarkable is the fact that Hildegard accomplished so much despite the fact that she suffered from pronounced feelings of self-doubt; and despite her lack of a formal education; and despite the fact that she had to deal with chronic illnesses, which probably included depression and migraine headaches; and, finally, despite the fact that she lived in a male-dominated culture and church that assigned subservient roles to women.

In other words, what I hope we can all take away from all this is the fact that the same *ruach elohim* which brooded over the formless void of chaos, and which has brooded over the messy lives of God's people throughout history, also broods over our messy lives as well; looking for ways to bring purpose and meaning to our chaos; looking for ways to bring light and hope into our darkness; and affirming that, despite the chaos and darkness around us, that creation is good and lovely and something to be cherished. And all because the Spirit of God— the breath of God— broods and hovers over us all like a tender mother.

Amen.